

Interview with CAPT Jane Vieira, CHC, USNR, BUMED Chaplain. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, Washington, DC, 25 Sept 2001.

Where were you on the morning of September 11th?

I was in a meeting with the Surgeon General and his senior medical staff here on the Hill in the Medal of Honor Hall. We were midway through the meeting when a person came into the room and handed the Surgeon General, VADM Mike Cowan, a note. He abruptly stopped the meeting and said that the two World Trade Center towers had been struck each by a different plane and that it was believed to be a suicide terrorist attack. He said, "This meeting is now terminated. You all have work to do. Go to your office and prepare how Navy medicine can respond."

We all dispersed very quietly; there was no talking. We each went to our buildings. I came back to my office and talked to my staff. We were trying to get information about what was going on in New York and had the radio on. We then heard a loud explosion. At that point we didn't know what it was but there was some talk that it might be something going on across the street at the State Department. Then we heard that the Pentagon had been hit by a twin engine commuter type plane. That was the first word.

We looked outside and saw black smoke billowing from the Pentagon, which can be seen from the south part of the hill here at BUMED. We then heard two minor explosions. There was a lot of confusion because there was word on the radio that a car bomb had gone off across the street at the State Department. That later proved to be false. What we, in fact, had heard were the fuel tanks on the plane exploding at the Pentagon. But the noise was that loud.

There were a lot of sirens and there was just a lot of commotion as people were trying to figure out what was going on both in the media. . . We weren't here very long when the word was put out all over the Hill that all federal buildings were to be closed down and everyone was to go home so they could clear the area in case more attacks were coming.

I got into my car and drove to Bethesda where I live but I didn't go home. I went to the Naval Hospital figuring that if there were casualties they would be brought to the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda. Since I had worked there for 3 ½ years I know the hospital very well so I went there to support the chaplain, CAPT Roy Bebee and his staff.

I ended up going to all the briefings with RADM [Kathleen] Martin which were happening every hour as they were preparing for the possibility of the [USNS] *Comfort* being deployed to New York and backfilling with reserve assets. The National Institutes of Health across the street had offered to provide some support in the form of doctors, nurses, and other support health professionals that Bethesda might need as they were gearing up to respond to the disaster in New York and preparing to deploy the *Comfort* with a 500-bed capacity. This would require over 700 health professionals to staff it at that level.

I was at the National Naval Medical Center until approximately 8 p.m. that night. Then I went home. I wasn't there more than 30 minutes when I received a call from the Chief of Chaplains Office saying that all chaplains in the area were being mobilized and that we would probably be making 46 death notification calls before midnight. All chaplains were being mustered at the Chief of Chaplains Office at the Navy Annex.

I called my deputy, LCDR Brad Taleen, and we went to the Chief of Chaplains Office to prepare to receive our family assignment. There are casualty assistance call officer teams--CACO teams--and these teams consist of a counselor plus a chaplain that go out to tell a family that their loved one is either missing or dead. It's a very hard job to do. Oftentimes, we're the

first notice that a family has. They see us standing in uniform at their door and they know that something is very wrong.

When we were at the Chief of Chaplains Office, teams were sent out to Naval District Washington to the Navy Yard to respond to these family notifications. I was not chosen for a CACO team. I was chosen as one of six chaplains to go to the Pentagon to take over the 3 a.m. to 9 a.m. shift in terms of caring for the rescue workers and the fire fighters there because it was a very difficult scene at that point. The fire was still very strong. It had not been put out. They were still looking for remains, not just remains but rescuing people who might still be alive.

I and five other chaplains walked to the chaplain operations tent right in front of the blast site at the Pentagon. At that point there was very little security around. We just walked over the barriers onto the grounds, and went up to the chaplain tent. My assignment along with another chaplain was to go into the inner courtyard of the Pentagon. We walked around the building and entered an open door, then made our way to the inner courtyard where there were fire fighters and rescue workers, just totally exhausted battling this fire. They said it was an extremely sticky fire and difficult to put out because it was very deep in the building--in the bowels of the Pentagon. They said they had never seen a building so well constructed that this plane could come in with such force and only go through only three of the five rings. Two of the rings had not even been touched. And with the exception of smoke damage, it was intact.

It was incredible! There was a slice that was taken out but the majority of the building was intact. By then we knew it was a 767 aircraft, that is bigger than a 757. They were explaining this to me. We talked a bit about the people. Did they experience any suffering? And it was their consensus that for the people on the plane and the people in the immediate vicinity of the crash, it was a very quick death, which, in a sense, is a blessing. The people around the periphery were those who experienced the most suffering. There were 74 people who were taken as patients to area hospitals, and those were the ones who suffered the most from the crash.

I stayed in the inner courtyard for the rest of the night until morning. I talked to the fire fighters and ministered to them. Everybody was in shock. Everybody was stunned between this and what we knew was going on at the World Trade Center in New York City. It was all incomprehensible. At that point we knew that it was hijackings but we didn't have all the information.

I went home in the morning--the 12th--and then drove back to Bethesda. I changed my clothes and then came back here to BUMED before going back to the Chief of Chaplains Office in the Pentagon. That day I worked with the recovery teams, not in the inner courtyard but in the outer grounds. I was involved in ministering to the recovery teams that were going into the wreckage and recovery teams that were emerging from the wreckage. Most of them were young soldiers who were members of the Old Guard, the honor guard that serves Arlington National Cemetery. These kids are really very sharp young men. I had to gown up in a protective--almost like a surgical gown but made of a plastic. This was to prevent us from being contaminated by any disease that might be present in the wreckage.

We had three chaplains for each recovery team. One would be with the recovery workers that went into the building itself as the remains were taken from the wreckage and put into black body bags. Then the remains were brought out on a stretcher and taken to a refrigerator truck. At the base of the truck on the ground we had another chaplain who would silently do a blessing. Then the remains were lifted up on the stretcher into the truck. There were six stretcher bearers including a chaplain--myself--in the refrigerator truck. We had three people on each side of the

stretcher in the truck. There was an Army nurse, a military doctor, who make the pronouncement of death, an EMT, I, the chaplain, and two stretcher bearers on the far end. We would receive the remains in the black bag on the stretcher. They would be brought up and then the doctor would unzip the bag, examine the remains, make the pronouncement of death, then rezip the bag. The bag was then lifted into place.

The reason we had chaplains present was two-fold: We wanted to provide dignity and honor to the dead. We had different blessings. We didn't know who they were or what faith they were but we provided a quiet, dignified, sacred prayer that would give honor to the person we were holding. And the second thing we wanted to do was to provide moral support to the people who were doing this. And we were not just standing around; we chaplains were lifting the bodies and carrying them into the refrigerator truck and out from the wreckage. Our people drew strength from this, seeing that their chaplain was with them.

On Wednesday we removed 28 bodies, and the next day we took out 38 bodies. And every one of these was blessed. I thought to myself afterward that we might even have blessed the terrorists. Most of the bodies were charred beyond recognition. Many were totally indistinguishable. And oftentimes there were just body parts; there wasn't a full body. There was one lady who didn't have a head and her feet were burned so that only her bones were showing. There were other people who were missing limbs and other bags that just had limbs. And so it would not have been inconceivable to think that someone we prayed over was actually the person who had committed the crime. Which is fine because the way I looked at it, they probably needed it--the prayer--because of what they had done. It was just pure evil what they had done.

That was a pretty powerful evolution to have. There was one element of that day which really shook me up. I was in the chaplain tent with my two chaplain assistants. I was taking some notes. All of a sudden this horn started blowing very loudly, like a warning sound, repeatedly. This voice came from outside the tent and said, "Everybody clear the area! Evacuate! Evacuate! Clear the area! Get out of those tents! Move away. There's an incoming, unidentified plane headed toward the Pentagon! Move! Move! Move!"

Immediately, everybody jumped up and there was a stampede away from the Pentagon toward the street. I jumped out and went out a flap in the tent and ended up by a fence about 8 feet high. I was standing there with people on either side of me climbing over this chain link fence. They had combat equipment on and were climbing over. My RPs were already on the other side of the fence and I could see them out there. I remember just holding on to the fence. I had an injury from an accident I had had the weekend before--a very bad fall from a bicycle. So I had an injured knee and was standing at this chain link fence. I looked up at the clear blue, very beautiful fall day and could hear the sound of the plane that was coming--this unidentified plane. I looked up at the sky and said to myself, "This is where I die." My heart was pounding; I was terrified. Someone came up on the other side of the fence, faced me, and said, "Come on. You can do it! Climb over. You can do it!"

And so I proceeded with my injured knee, scared, shaking, to climb over this fence, go over the sharp points at the top and down the other side. And then I started moving toward the street with the rest of the people. Then all of a sudden someone said, "It's okay. It's a false alarm. It's a FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) plane!" Oh, my God! But my heart was still pounding. That experience was absolutely horrendous. Here we were standing next to a disaster site with the fire still smoldering, still being put out, not knowing what's coming next, and to receive this sudden warning to evacuate because of another incoming plane.

For all we knew it was another terrorist attack. That incident caused me more anxiety than handling the remains.

I went back on succeeding days to the Pentagon. I was wearing camouflage utilities because I had served with the Marine Corps and that was the required uniform they had established. We were working as a joint force with Army and Air Force chaplains. The next time I went back I was assigned to the decontamination tent where the recovery teams and fire fighters were emerging from the wreckage. They had to be washed down to prevent disease because we were dealing with a lot of carnage. I would talk with them as they came out. I actually set up a little customer service table and had all the things they needed all laid out. Everybody started coming to my table. They would come up and I would say, "How can I serve you? What can I get for you?" And these big, burly men--the rescue workers--allowed me to minister to them in simple ways, by opening up a little handy-wipe package or a handing them a tissue or a baby wipe we were using to clean masks and wipe their faces.

These little things enabled them to open up to me and share with me what they were going through. I think they felt served. They felt cared for in these little acts. Because of that my table had all these people lined up, which was great. I was there to take care of them and minister to them. The young recovery workers, the fire fighters, the FBI agents, the demolition team all started flocking to my customer service table to get their masks cleaned. So I had a real ministry all day long. I was there for about 12 hours just doing this. I took one break to have some water and some lunch.

During this time a lot of VIPs were coming through the site. By this time there were a lot of tents set up--American Red Cross, Salvation Army, McDonalds, Burger King, and all sorts of rescue and demolition teams from all over the country--everywhere--Los Angeles, Tennessee, New Jersey. It was like a tent city. And the senators, congressmen, high level military people would walk through to look at the blast site. We just kept working.

It was a tremendous opportunity to minister, working beside chaplains of other services, of other faiths. Being there at such a critical moment in our nation's history was a tremendous honor.

I am of the opinion that we have not begun to realize the magnitude of this tragedy. I believe it's a turning point for our country not only in terms of being prepared for the unexpected, but also in terms of our psychological preparedness. We were never prepared for this unexpected event psychologically and in other ways. We have lost our naivete as a young nation. But I truly believe that we will not only come through this but will come through stronger and wiser, more compassionate, with a sense of justice and equality, and a unity and diversity that we have ever known before.

As much as it has been a tragedy, it also has been a significant teaching moment for our country on what we really stand for. Our country is not represented by buildings, whether they are the World Trade Center or the Pentagon. People who don't understand America might think that that is our god--the financial and military capitals of the world--that was struck down. But that is not our god. Our God is in the spirit represented by people of heroic proportions in their goodness, in their love, in their compassion, in their respect for differences. It's in the fire fighters who raced into a building without considering the color, the race, or the creed of the people they were running to save. It's in the rescue workers at the Pentagon who did the same, who pulled people out from under burning desks and from burning rooms, through toxic fumes to bring them to safety. And it's in the tremendous outpouring of the American people in

response to this tragedy. And that's the spirit of America. That's our foundation. Our strength is people.